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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in 32 families in Chicago, with children ranging from 18 months to 5 years, to examine the role of parents in their young children's language acquisition. Specifically investigated were parents' attitudes on language acquisition, opportunities used to prompt their youngsters to say a new word/utterance, and the utterances learned. Four instruments were used to collect data: a parents' questionnaire which provided background information on attitudes about language and languages used in the family; a word acquisition chart which documented prompts, contexts, words/utterances heard and learned in their complexity; audio-recording which provided parent-child linguistic interaction and complexity in a natural setting; and parent interviews which helped the researcher clarify observations as a way of cross-checking the study's internal validity. Findings suggest that parents used various strategies and prompts to help their children in acquiring new words and structures. A multiple correlation analysis indicated that: parent attitudes and beliefs were related to their children's acquisition of language; and hearing "a lot of language" was positively related to producing "a lot of language." All the parents indicated that school had a strong influence on their children's acquisition of new English words, but family/home played a significant role in nurturing language acquisition and development in general. (Contains 18 references.) (NKA)

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by Selina L.P. Mushi

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PARENTS' ROLE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Introduction

There are many approaches to understanding language acquisition and development, but none of them can fully explain how children acquire language, what they need at each stage of language development, and how best to meet those needs. Researchers tend to explore different factors in terms of their contribution to young children's acquisition of language. Studying different factors systematically increases the knowledge available on how language acquisition can be supported and enhanced. This is a summary of a study on the role of parents in their young children's language acquisition. The study was conducted in 32 families in Chicago, with children ranging from 18 months to five years. This age group was important because children need language more and more to get their needs met, especially with the introduction of schooling and other activities outside the home.

Research has documented strategies such as scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1987), "expansion" and "recasts" (Berk 1999:360), "expansion" and "extension" (Hulit & Howard, 1997: 149). While these strategies help children use words and sentence structures they learn, they are not universal (Marcus, 1993; Valian, 1993), yet all typically developing children experience strong urge to communicate and be socially connected. The current study goes further to

investigate parents attitudes on language acquisition, opportunities used to prompt their young children to say a new word/utterance, and the utterances learned.

Conceptual Framework

Research has indicated that children acquire the receptive skills of language before they acquire the productive skills (Krashen, 1981, 1982; Ingram, 1975; Piaget, 1966). This means that children hear and attach meanings to words before they can pronounce them. The two processes, comprehension and production, then support each other. For example, if a child is able to ask "when", the child certainly has acquired a sense of time. Hearing words and attaching some meanings to them implies interaction with other people, usually parents. *How much language do young children hear at home? How much language do they produce? What prompts do parents use to create the need for their children to say a new word?*

It is not surprising that in some cultures linguistic interaction occurs even with newborn babies, who cannot understand the language but react to it in certain noticeable ways. It is documented that linguistic interaction, especially in the form of conversation is consistently related to language progress in early childhood (Hart & Ridley, 1995; McCartney, 1984). Psycholinguists have found that babies are quite competent in perceiving speech sounds. Within the first few months babies were found to be able to distinguish among some consonant and vowel sounds, intonations, pitch, and loudness (Trehub, 1976, Morse, 1972; Bench, 1969; Bridger, 1961). Brain research has also suggested that the

more a child is stimulated by linguistic input the more the brain strengthens synaptic connections and neuron myelinization for language development (Johnson, 1998). Neurons that are rarely stimulated lose their connective fibers thus reducing the number of synapses ("Synaptic pruning") (Berk, 1999: 297). Linguistic interaction at an early age is therefore important for cognitive development, especially

for acquiring language. *How early do parents or other adults start interacting linguistically with young children?*

Evidence has also suggested that young children perceive language differently from other sounds. Newborn babies were found to display more activity in the left side of their brains when they heard language, and more activity on the right side of their brains when they heard music (Molfese, Freeman, and Palemo, 1975). This "natural inclination" to language is in line with the perception that children are "wired" for language (Chomsky, 1968; Hockett, 1960). However, it has been argued strongly that the nativist explanation for language acquisition is far from enough to explain how children acquire and develop language. Other theoretical approaches to understanding language acquisition, i.e., behaviorist, cognitive, pragmatic, social interactionist and information processing interpretations have suggested other reasonably sound approaches. While theoretical approaches will continue to be debated, practical observations and interpretations of children learning language often draw from the different approaches in the effort to explain the myriad of factors that take place in the process of acquiring language. One such important factor is the role of parents.

What are parents' attitudes towards language acquisition and how do the attitudes practically influence their linguistic interaction with their children?

Children develop "perceptual maps" that direct them towards the sounds of the language they hear most frequently, and away from the sounds of other languages they don't hear as often (Newberger, 1997:24). Naming things and actions at home or school will influence the words a child picks up. Young children are bombarded with toys and

materials to interact with. *Does the selection of toys and materials at home or school influence the words acquired and used? How?*

Method

Four instruments were used to collect data for the study: a parents' questionnaire, a word acquisition chart, audio-recording and parent interviews. The questionnaire provided general background information on attitudes about language and languages used in the family. The word chart documented prompts, contexts, words/utterances heard and learned and their complexity; audio-recording provided parent-child linguistic interaction and complexity in a natural setting; and parent interviews helped the researcher clarify her observations as a way of cross-checking internal validity of the study.

Findings

Some important clues featured from the analysis of data from the parents' questionnaires. Parents used various strategies and prompts to help their children in acquiring new words and structures. It seemed the parents were more active in their children's language acquisition than research has indicated in the past. A multiple correlation analysis indicated that: Parent attitudes and beliefs were related to their children's acquisition of language; hearing "a lot of language" (a word/utterance or two every 5 minutes) was positively related to producing "a lot of language". It was not clear whether the complexity of the language heard from parents was related to the complexity of language produced, and how. Parent interview responses indicated that "meaning shaping" (for lack of better term) by parents seemed to be taking place, selection of toys and materials had some influence on naming of objects and actions.

All the parents in the study indicated that school had a strong influence on their children's acquisition of new English words, but family/home played a significant role in nurturing language acquisition and development in general. Parents, and especially mothers spent a lot of time with their children, communicating through language. It was apparent from the tapes that the mothers used much more advanced language than the children could easily understand. However, repetition and non-verbal gestures helped the children make sense of their mothers' linguistic interactions. Sometimes the mother would say something and at the same time doing it, so the child could relate the mother's action and linguistic production.

Siblings played an important role in helping their younger brothers or sisters acquire new words in the mother tongue. The older children would translate words from English to the other tongue, for the younger children to understand their meaning. It seemed that children that were born other countries had a better grasp of their mother tongue, compared to children born in the United States, age not withstanding.

All the participating parents indicated that it was very important for their children to acquire both English and their mother tongue. English was seen as the language of education and advancement, while the mother tongue was in some cases seen as a tool for social learning within the family and in the community. Parents believed that for their children to understand the important values of their culture, the children would have to be able to speak and understand their mother tongue.

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